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Planning brings a town to life

When the founders of the Ryland Group built their first houses in the new town of Columbia, Md., 25 years ago, they had no idea how far this venture into Howard County would take them. After all, they were just one of 33 builders operating in Columbia who offered new homes to buyers who came to experience a different style of living in the suburbs of Washington.

Ryland is now the second-largest home builder in the nation, having built more than 100,000 homes across the country and boasting annual revenues of \$1.3 billion. Recently, it announced that it will occupy the entire new 167,000-square-foot Ryland Group headquarters building in downtown Columbia.

It is good time to look back and examine the process by which a sparsely settled raw landscape grew into a Cranston-sized community of nearly 76,000 residents.

Located just 40 minutes from Washington and 30 minutes from Baltimore, Columbia is situated in one of the fastest-growing urban corridors in the nation, one that ensures that there will continue to be strong demand for the housing and quality environment found in the new town.

The Rouse Co., builder of Columbia, is a master at picking out the right location for its operations. Primarily a builder and operator of offices, shopping centers and malls, Rouse's holdings run from the 215,000-square-foot Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston to the 1-million-square-foot Austin Mall in Austin, Texas.

When the Rouse planners were looking at possible sites for a new town in the early 1960s, one of the short-listed areas was the Providence-Boston corridor, deemed to be a strong growth area. Investigation into this region determined that there were many small buildings, so land acquisitions for the town would be difficult. This was unfortunate, for even today, Columbia is a magnet for visitors from throughout the world. It is an example of a successful planned American community.

As a private developer, Rouse does not have governmental power of eminent domain, so all purchases of land had to be negotiated, most of them by fictitious realty firms. In this manner, 14,000 acres were purchased, an area larger than the entire city of Providence.

Columbia today makes up 41 percent of Howard County's population, provides 55 percent of its jobs and is its biggest source of income. Columbia's residents and businesses have provided more tax revenues to the county than the cost of services provided to Columbia. This has helped keep the county's bond ratings consistently high, and helps constrain costs and taxes.

It also has helped the homeowner. In Maryland's form of government, Columbia is part of the county and receives fire, police, school and selected social services from the

county. Yet while population and services provided in Columbia have increased, tax rates paid by the Columbia homeowner have fallen since the first buyers moved there in 1967.

The high quality of living in Columbia also has been a major draw for businesses, which today number more than 2300. They include Apple Computer, Westinghouse, Cigna, State Farm Insurance and Sun Microsystems. These and other firms occupy almost 19 million square feet of space in the town center and the 13 office, industrial and R&D parks in the community. And even more importantly, they provide for more than 54,000 people.

As a planned new town, Columbia is organized around neighborhoods that support an elementary school to which children can walk and also provide some limited shopping; villages that provide secondary-level schools and small shopping areas; and the town center—home to the 873,000-square-foot Columbia Mall, which draws shoppers from the surrounding areas as well as from Baltimore and Washington.

All property owners belong to the Columbia Association. Annual assessment and some user fees provide for the 22 community centers, the 21 swimming pools, summer camps, skating rink and 2700 acres of developed open space, all operated by this community-controlled, private,

non-profit corporation.

Most unique for a suburb, 27 percent of the population is non-white and Hispanic. This is a community where all people have access to housing. There is even subsidized housing for low-income persons.

Columbia is unique also in that 95 percent of its residents have a high school diploma, 58 percent have a college degree. The median house price is \$150,5000, and the median household income is \$55,419.

True, Columbia is an affluent suburban development. But it is still different from similar affluent communities, primarily in its open housing, the variety of services provided, and its real sense of community and identity that is common among residents. It should also be noted that over 60 percent of the houses bought in Columbia are sold to Columbia residents.

Columbia is a model that should be emulated. Local builders should visit this community to get some idea of the vision that created it and the practice used to reach this goal. They would be the wiser, and the buying public would be better satisfied.

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